

## 36 Teenagers Show Us Their Generation

The New York Times

October 30, 2018 Tuesday 18:20 EST

Copyright 2018 The New York Times Company All Rights Reserved

**Section:** LEARNING

**Length:** 4034 words

**Byline:** Katherine Schulten

**Highlight:** “What can you show us that might help make the portrait of ‘Gen Z’ more interesting, nuanced, complete or real?” we asked. Nearly 2,200 students answered.

### **Body**

---

Back in September, we [challenged](#) teenagers to analyze media and adult stereotypes about their generation — then take photos to counter them.

“What can you show us from your own life, or the lives of those around you, that might help make the portrait of ‘Gen Z’ more interesting, nuanced, complete or real?” we asked.

Nearly 2,200 students answered. They showed us teenagers in cars, in classrooms, at parties, in swimming pools, on playing fields and in their beds; teenagers with their dogs, their moms, their friends, their homework, their makeup, their video games and their prom dates; teenagers running, jumping, studying, singing, vaping, taking selfies, protesting and kissing.

But the thing they showed us most often — by our count, in over 70 percent of the images we received — was teenagers with their phones. In their statements, our participants variously described the devices as their friends and their family, their enemies and their addiction. Some said adults could never understand such a complex relationship. Others pointed out that adults were just as dependent.

Below, the 36 finalists — nine winners, 13 runners-up and 14 honorable mentions — whose images and accompanying artists’ statements impressed us most. Take a look and let us know what you think. If you like the collection as much as we do, you’ll understand why we already can’t wait to run this [contest](#) again next year.

Artists’ statements have been lightly edited for length and clarity. A version of this piece, which you can see [here](#), will appear in print on Nov. 4. There, the students’ work will run alongside [these answers from teachers](#) to the question, “Is this generation misunderstood?”

#### Winners

My generation is believed to have abandoned the old ways. We are the first to grow up on Snapchat and Instagram, but while increased technology has shifted many aspects of our lives, it has not caused us to discard the traditions of our ancestors. In my photograph, a teenage girl is lighting a votive candle in a church.

Tradition is tremendously important to Maxine, the subject of my photograph. Every Sunday, she attends church service with her family, something that her parents also did when they were teenagers. My generation lives in a different world than past generations, however participating in traditions helps merge this gap and bring us together.  
—Eleanor Kinsel, 16

## 36 Teenagers Show Us Their Generation

I grew up writing poems. Pregnancy was just never one of my poetry titles until now. Believing I could succeed even with a teenage pregnancy, I went for it. And succeed I did. I tore apart the imperfections of a pregnant teenager, I stayed in school. I killed the trend of failure, as I walked across my graduation stage. I danced at my prom. I was a teenage pregnancy. But it's no longer defined as my pregnancy. I had a baby. —Jodi Davidson, 18

This girl is invisible to the world around her, just like how the issue of mental illness is sometimes invisible to adults and the older generation.

Over past years, 50 percent more teens — girls especially — have been diagnosed with mental disorders. Living with a mental illness can affect all aspects of a teen's life. It affects how teens interact with others, how they participate in school, their social life, home life, their relationships and overall health. Suicide rates have escalated as well. Social media has taken over teens' whole identities, pushing them to search for perfection within themselves but finding each and every imperfection they have at the same time. Anxiety, depression and many more disorders are engulfing the minds and lives of young people every day. —Catherine McCarthy, 15

Release. When the older generation sees teens vape I feel like they automatically think “druggie” or “delinquent.” For some teens that is true, but there are some of us who use the nicotine or even just the action of vaping as an escape. When we are at our lowest point, we all need some sort of release. A breath of fresh air. Or a breath of air that tastes like Swedish fish. For adults that escape is alcohol. For us, vape is something we can control when everything else is spiraling down. We can control how much we take in, how it looks when we exhale, and for a split second we have a distraction. —Abigail Thomas, 15

In China, we, Generation Z, are usually labeled with more freedom and higher living standards. How our life is much better than ever is always emphasized by adults.

I believe many teenagers in China are tired of hearing this. We were born under the “One Child Policy” in China, so as the only child in an extended family, we naturally become the focus. However, being the focus brings overwhelming expectations and pressure. We are expected to stand out, but not everyone can be the winner under such a competitive system. The admission rate of enrolling in a Chinese top-tier college like Fudan University is about 1.37 percent.

Our lives are calculated through formulas and equations on the blackboard, controlling the risk and maximizing the probability of being successful. Yet against the structures, we are still thriving in finding our inner voices desperately. We are dancing against formulas. —Yao Xiao, 16

Aimless. Entitled. Queer. Depressed. This is all the world sees of Gen Z, or iGen. Sure, every generation is ridiculed by the previous one, but for iGen it's different. We carry the nagging voices of our parents, as well as their mistakes. Growing up in a failing economy (and after the recession), we've become more responsible with money, not asking for it unless it's necessary. We spend our days not hunched over our stereotypical phones, but over our textbooks. My life revolves around school and my future. Our lives are polluted with the high expectations — conscious or not — of everyone around us. High-stakes tests and the Common Core have molded us into robots. Despite all of these and more, many of us intend to make this generation the greatest.

Not only will we succeed, we'll do it loudly and proudly. We are more capable than you think. We're loud because we have to be. We have a future. We are the future. —Keaira Cox, 15

These two boys are my little brothers. Andres is 14 and Angel is 3, and Angel looks up to Andres so much. This was taken on the football field after my brother's game. You can see the connection between the two clearly, Angel looking up to Andres and Andres acknowledging it proudly because he knows he became a good role model for him to follow.

Adults get the wrong impression that we don't care about anyone else but ourselves and that we don't care about how we're seen, but they couldn't be more wrong. We know younger ones look up to us and try to do better for them. —Alexis Cenicerros, 16

## 36 Teenagers Show Us Their Generation

Many people see innocence as a period of time in one's life that typically expires during adolescence. As we grow up we lose our playfulness, our memories, our ability to think independently and creatively. We are supposed to experiment, we are supposed to be competitive, we are supposed to grow. What if, through this awkward lane change, we hold on to our innocence, our memories, our personality?

This photo is about Andrew, a skateboarder from Los Angeles who, I believe, has held on to his childhood. Andrew is 16 years old living in a time where most people his age try their best to act older, act hard, act big, like a grown-up. He is still playful, still young, still innocent. As others grow new connections, Andrew's childlike personality prevents others from associating with him. It tarnishes their "experimental" image. It cramps their style.

His extended connection to his innocence, something most kids conceal under their tough guy image, shines bright. His boldness stands out, and unlike the others he isn't afraid to show it. —Deen Babakhyi, 17

Meet my friend Max, a 17-year-old kid from West Hartford, Conn. He's not reliant on 21st Century technology. He uses it, sure, but as an aid rather than a life line. The internet, for Max, is a place to discover how to construct a traditional wigwam, to build a skateboard ramp to launch off of, or to find a secret skate spot underneath a bridge. Max has more patience than most adults I know, being more willing to create than to take. He has shaped, cut and painted several of his own skateboards and ramps. It's more fun and personal to make something with your own hands than to just buy it with an app on your phone.

Contrary to the stereotypes about my generation, we love to play outside and use our imaginations, we love to create, and we love to explore. Everything is a process, just like taking and developing these photographs on 35mm film. I get more satisfaction from being patient and persistent than I do from instantaneous rewards. —Jack Wisialowski, 17

## Runners-Up

Junior surfing is a sport that is widely ignored by the media. There are a lot of teen surfers around the world who could be pro but don't get the chance because it is so hard to make it. The media has looked at the pathway from youth to professional in mainstream sports like basketball or football; but for young surfers, the pathway is rarely explored. —Hendrix Frankenreiter, 15

I believe teenage defiance of gender/cultural norms are generally misunderstood by older generations. We challenge the older ways of the past. I believe that we have more tolerance of people being who they want to be, even if it looks "weird" or "abnormal." My friend in the picture is an openly gay black man and he is extremely proud of it. He dresses however he wants, unafraid to wear a dress one [day] or a full suit another. To be a POC and a member of the LGBTQ community is extremely dangerous, especially in this tumultuous time of politics. But teenagers are a freight train refusing to be stopped and we will change society to be a model of what we want and is needed. —Krshna Airaudi, 17

Two years prior to taking this, I was recruited to the Syracuse High cross country team as a 13-year-old. I was terrified to start training with people who were two to four years older than me, but a senior assured me that it would be one of the best experiences of my life. She told me that every day after practice, she and her friends would sit in the locker and just talk about their day, and that even though something like that seemed so simple, it was the highlight of her day. As I was sitting with my friends after a hard run on a cold October afternoon, I found myself in the exact vision of what my past teammate had told me.

I titled this picture "Locker Room Talk" because it contrasts with the meaning that it has in our day and age. It shows the innocence and happiness of teenage girls, in place of men speaking in ways that degrade women in the locker room. —Kennedy Conroy, 15

Growing up in suburbia with lesbian parents has its benefits and struggles. Throughout my childhood, I have had to grow thick skin for the ignorance of other people. The constant fear and tormentors I had to endure made me feel worthless. From those traumatic experiences, I have been shaped into the empathetic and open-minded person I

## 36 Teenagers Show Us Their Generation

am today. I documented the day to day events of my family and captured the warmth of my home life. Bringing realism to my pictures spreads true awareness on the normality of my existence. —Marissa Perales, 17

As a teen attending boarding school, my lifestyle is influenced by technology in a monumental way. With my family 1,021 miles away, I have adopted a new family, others going through the same story as me. This photo is depicting boys using technology to have a good time. They are laughing and enjoying themselves, while interacting with both technology and each other.

Living the life of an independent teen involves being trapped within the confines of school rules. I live by a schedule, lights out at 10:45 every night, no more phones. I lie in a dark room with my heart racing out of my chest waiting for the door down the hallway to close. Only to leap out of bed, turn my TV, Playstation, phone and headphones on, to immerse myself in a reality that was not before possible. Going from a dark lonely room to speaking and having a good time with the people I enjoy, some might say this is the best time of day. You can simply let loose in your own world, in the rule-less reality of technology, that adults simply do not understand. —Tristan Russell, 16

I think the most common misconception about my generation is our presumed lack of depth. We all have many sides that create who we are, we all have felt silenced and at the same time, we all have the capacity for joy.

This model is bathed in red, a color that depicts the violence, anger, and wildness put onto him by others. Yet, the light doesn't distort his face entirely. It bounces off his skin, so radiant that it shapes the red light into the three silhouettes behind him. Those silhouettes are there to show a more holistic representation of the many facets of his person that no stereotype can fulfill. —Taeya Boi-Doku, 16

Every summer I go to Camp Illahee, an all-girls summer camp in Brevard, North Carolina, for a month. All of my friends ask me, "How do you go a month without your phone?" but really it is the easiest thing in the world. Camp is amazing because there is no society, no social media, no pressures, it is just about having fun and improving relationships with people around you. I am beyond grateful for camp because it shows me what the world is like without phones. You can visually see in these photos the emotion: happiness, love, and peacefulness. No one at home gets to experience what pure love and appreciation feels like. —Ellie Kollme, 15

## United States of Anxiety: Lockdown

Living in a post-9/11, post-Columbine society, we live with an absurd amount of anxiety generated by the climate we live in, on top of the high rates of mental illness we have. Financial crises have turned us into skeletons of robots who study and work harder than what is considered healthy to get into a solid career field in order to not get laid off in the distant future. Gun violence and school shootings have made going to school and outside risky. Our safe haven is no longer safe or a haven. Politically we are in a new era; under the Trump administration, we never know what's coming next for anyone, especially for our fellow Gen Z kids who aren't as affluent as others. —Kathryn Ritchie, 16

We were born into technology.

Teens spend hours and hours on their devices every single day. We don't go outside as much, we don't spend time with our families as much. Technology is our family and we all cherish it. It gives us comfort and it has everything that we could possibly need in our life. Before I took these pictures, my friend Piper Snapchatted me asking if I wanted to hang out, I said yes, but instead, we didn't really hang out at all, we were just on our phones the whole entire time we were together. —Ethan Phantavong, 16

She's just a girl, and she's on fire.

Adults do not understand why teenagers dye their hair in bright colors, because they, of course, prefer natural beauty to unnatural. But it's not childish, as they often think, it's a form of self-expression. This is a vivid manifestation of the teenagers' personality, individuality, which is trying to get out. Modern teenagers want to be bright and memorable. They want to attract attention, a lot of attention. —Sabina Sarsenova, 19



## 36 Teenagers Show Us Their Generation

This is from a shoot with my friend Abuot, and a model/stranger I found on the internet named Jordan. Abuot has a high concentration of melanin in her skin, while Jordan is a black man with white skin as a result of his albinism. Both models have grown up hearing all types of comments surrounding their skin tones. They quickly became comfortable posing with each other and the juxtaposition of the pair is why this is one of my favorite shoots. To quote Jordan, "There's no one way to be black." —Zelle Westfall, 17

I'm a lot of things, I'm also American.

In this terrible moment, all I want is to be a plain old American teenager. Who can simply mourn without fear. Who doesn't share last names with a suicide bomber. Who goes to dances and can talk to her parents about anything and can walk around without always being anxious. And who isn't a presumed terrorist first and an American second. —Rawan Saleh, 17

Within every teenager is still a childlike heart. Although we start to form our own opinions and determine what we value, it doesn't mean we're "growing up too fast." We're still having fun while learning who we are and what we want to be. —Kassydi Rone, 15

## Honorable Mentions

My photo is a representation of the carefree explorative parts of teenagehood that incorporate emotional connection, personality development, life experience, and adventure. Some of which, adults rarely get to be a part of. Our own social groups, beliefs, lingo, form of communication, becoming who we are as individuals; this is the part that is hidden or sometimes unreachable for adults about their children. One of my very favorite movies, "20th Century Women," has a quote that really stuck out to me: (Dorothea (mother) talking about her son to his friend), "You get to see him out in this world as person. I never will." I believe there is a part of each of us that we either intentionally, or unintentionally, don't reveal to elders, and parents specifically.

I wanted to capture a candid, jovial, blithe moment shared between teenagers when no one is caring or worried about who's watching. —Maya Pachman, 15

We are not lazy but tired. Tired of how we are portrayed and treated by others. Like self-absorbed children who don't understand how the world works. Older generations, including our parents and grandparents, are unaware of what goes on behind the scenes of teenage life and only see the moments of rest. If anything, they want to believe we are lazy so they are not required to own up to their inactions concerning the world's problems.

We are leaders, circus masters balancing the rest of our childhood while fighting to improve the world. —Lydia Valentine, 16

These are my two best friends, Ben and Jordan. They love to work out and love to wrestle; they play football for their high school varsity teams. From the eye of a parent their kids look like lazy people who sit on their phones all day Snapchatting, or scrolling through their Instagram feed, and things like that, but in reality when they're with their friends they are extremely active. Bottom line is that teenagers are underestimated. —Chanakya Duggineni, 17

We teenagers are seen always looking into a lifeless screen, reflecting back an image of ourselves that we are obsessed with. Even in an outdoor setting, our cellphones are a lingering temptation that never leaves our sides, whether we are on them or not. —Teresa Scalanga, 17

Visiting Siem Reap, Cambodia, with my school UNICEF club, I had the chance to go to a school and spend time with those incredible children. They were so kind and open to me that I still hold those memories close to my heart. I think one aspect of teenage life that may be misunderstood by adults is that my generation cares about the world around us and wants to build bridges between different cultures instead of walls. Even though those children come from an environment that lacks many amenities that children from my country take for granted, they were so happy to be learning and always smiled. —Junghyun Shin, 17

## 36 Teenagers Show Us Their Generation

Three girls have a friendship based on supporting one another to achieve their aspirations in life. They're looking at the sky and forward for what life will bring for them. Society tends to think that all teenage friendships are based on doing rebellious things, but friends are actually the ones that help us get through our struggles. —Lusanda Zulu, 18

My photo shows a football player looking down, with the weight of the world on his shoulders, as he finds out if he got accepted into college.

Most of society believes teenage football players focus on their sport rather than education. Because a lot of students cannot afford college or a higher level of education, they are forced to rely on their sport to help them get into college. A lot of the time student athletes do not do as well as others in school because society does not understand how much pressure it puts on students to go to college. —Sydney Austin, 17

In this photo, the subject is taking off his headphones to look up at the stars. Our generation is labeled as the bored/tech age, which isn't inaccurate, but our generation can still appreciate life and its qualities without a screen in our faces. —Gaige Arnold, 17

Drill team is all about sisterhood and bonding with each other and lifting our spirits. We live in a society where we judge so easily of others' insecurities. We try so hard to fit in with the people around us that we lose ourselves in the mix. Women have a tendency to believe that somehow looking a certain way will translate into people loving you more. Being able to dance and feel free of the world is the feeling of not having to worry about appearance or what anyone else thinks about your life. —Jimena Lozano, 16

We only see things through our phones. Our generation is so into technology that we don't see life around that. All day every day we text or post on social media. —Noah Lee, 17

My generation has concentrated on what is happening on their favorite YouTube channel or what's going to happen next in a TV show they're watching, rather than real experiences. Technology has taken over teenagers and even the younger members of Gen Z. This generation is talented at tuning out real life and getting submerged in a digital world. —Myles Williams, 15

We are fed up with society instructing us on who to be and what to think, when the purpose of our existence is to be who we are. As teenagers, our ongoing competition with each other, as well as the unrealistic expectations that are set by [the] media, lead to undesirable effects. In actuality, most of us need the emotional connection of relationships with people our age to access the most pure source of joy possible: the love and support that we receive from our classmates. —Natalia Jovovich, 16

I originally shot my photos with the intention of capturing a notoriously affluent boy at school, juxtaposed with his personal life. However, after spending my afternoon with him and upon looking through the photos I shot, the nurturing and loving behavior he showed toward his brother enhanced my original impression of him and revealed a person I wouldn't have otherwise known.

As modern day teenagers, we seek out the deeper connections we yearn for through methods that older generations struggle to understand and mistake for addictions and flaws — such as social media — all for the sake of getting closer with the world and those around us. —Joylynne Hoang, 16

This is a girl sawing wood in theater after a necessary set piece became dislodged, endangering the cast members. This challenges the stereotypes that all teenagers possess no work ethic and have little care for the well-being of others. It displays a moment that many adults do not get to witness. —John Hunter Rutledge, 16

And 20 More...

These 20 students made it to the final round.

Mikayla Barber, Kyra Bergmann, Yun Ping Chuang, Kaley Dawson, Bekka Ellis, Fangting Gu, Taylor Gutierrez, Jennifer Hernandez, Madelynn Howe, Justin Lu, Nneamaka Nwaigbo, Tucker Obering, Mimi Offor, Rachel Renwick, Andrew Smith, Tommy Tranfaglia, Alonso Vazquez, Olivia Whalen, Evan Weiss and Logan Zucker

## 36 Teenagers Show Us Their Generation

Thank you to everyone who participated, and don't forget that [The Learning Network runs contests for teenagers all year long.](#)

**Judges**

Thank you to the Times art director Corinne Myller and the photo editor Alana Celii, who worked with Learning Network staff — Shannon Doyne, Caroline Gilpin, Michael Gonchar, Natalie Proulx and Katherine Schulten — to choose from the many wonderful images we received.

PHOTO: "Meet my friend Max, a 17-year-old kid from West Hartford, Conn. He's not reliant on 21st Century technology. He uses it, sure, but as an aid rather than a life line," writes Jack Wisialowski, 17, who took this photo. You can read his full artist's statement below. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Jack Wisialowski FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

## Classification

---

**Language:** ENGLISH

**Document-Type:** News

**Publication-Type:** Web Blog

**Subject:** STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (90%); ADOLESCENTS & TEENS (89%); TEENAGE PREGNANCY (89%); PREGNANCY & CHILDBIRTH (88%); SELFIES (78%); TEACHING & TEACHERS (78%); SPORTS & RECREATION FACILITIES & VENUES (76%); TRENDS & EVENTS (76%); ADDICTION (75%); DOGS (73%); AWARDS & PRIZES (72%); MENTAL ILLNESS (50%); Teenagers and Adolescence (%); Photography (%)

**Industry:** SELFIES (78%)

**Load-Date:** November 22, 2018